

Press Release -- Internet and Tech Initiatives

CONGRESSMEN STEARNS AND BOUCHER INTRODUCE ADVANCED INTERNET COMMUNICATIONS SERVICES LEGISLATION

Legislation Will Stimulate AICS Deployment

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(Washington, D.C.) - U.S. Representatives Cliff Stearns (R-FL) and Rick Boucher (D-VA) today introduced legislation to apply a light regulatory touch to the deployment of Advanced Internet Communications Services (AICS) in order to facilitate the rapid deployment of new applications such as Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP). The bill, entitled, the Advanced Internet Communications Services Act of 2004, outlines procedures to promote investment and innovation in the deployment of advanced applications such as VoIP while maintaining core public policies that impose limited obligations on AICS providers that offer voice communications.

"In 2003, the state of Florida chose to allow VoIP to develop free from unnecessary regulation. The Legislature felt that such action was in the public interest, and I believe it was the proper course of action," Stearns said. "This bill goes a step further by removing Advanced Internet Communications Services from debate that exists in whether to classify AICS as an information service or telecommunications service. Furthermore, by establishing that AICS are interstate services, we eliminate the regulatory uncertainty of a myriad of different state regulatory approaches which would impede investment in these new services," he added.

"The measure which Mr. Stearns and I are introducing today will enable the expedited deployment of AICS services by placing all authority over these services at the federal level, treating all providers of the services equally under federal law and applying a light regulatory touch which will encourage investment in, and the deployment of, AICS on various Internet platforms, Boucher said. "At the same time, our measure will impose targeted responsibilities on AICS voice providers to assure that universal service funding is sustained, that E-911 services are maintained, that owners of the public-switched network are compensated when their facilities are utilized for the termination of Internet-enabled voice calls and that individuals with disabilities can be assured of access," he added.

The Advanced Internet Communications Services Act would provide regulatory certainty for the deployment of AICS by granting exclusive authority to regulate these services at the Federal Communications Commission. Advanced Internet Communications Services operate by means of an Internet Protocol capability which enables a consumer to send or receive communications through IP addressing, regardless of whether the communication is voice, data, video or a combination thereof.

In view of the fact that applications such as VoIP are competitive services, the proposed legislation would ensure that neither the FCC, nor any state could regulate the prices, terms or other conditions under which such services are offered.

In addition, the Stearns-Boucher bill would require the FCC to establish complete regulatory parity among cable operators, traditional telecommunications carriers and all other providers of AICS. "The disparate rules which currently govern different categories of telecommunications service providers have distorted investment and impeded the deployment of new services for consumers. It is time to scrap the old series of regulatory 'boxes' in which services have been historically placed and recognize, for the first time, that all Internet platform providers, whether they be cable companies, telephone companies or wireless companies should be treated equally in the provision of Advanced Internet Communications Services," Boucher said.

The Advanced Internet Communications Services Act would end the debate regarding the classification of IP based communications services into the old traditional regulatory categories. The Stearns-Boucher measure would recognize AICS as a new and unique form of service and direct the FCC to regulate it as such. Under the legislation, the FCC would impose minimal regulation of Advanced Internet Communications Voice services in four key areas only:

Provision of emergency services, such as E-911

Universal service obligations and benefits

Compensation for use of the public-switched telephone network

Access for persons with disabilities

Concluded Stearns, "VoIP is a tremendous advancement in voice communications, however, it is but one application. Advanced Internet Communications Services can provide all the communication, information, and entertainment applications a consumer could want or need. These promising new services should not be automatically sentenced to smothering legacy regulation. Our bill offers the best deregulatory approach in addressing Advanced Internet Communications Services."